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ABSTRACT

Francophone West Africa has committed itself to the goal of universal formal education as the most effective method of insuring rapid economic and national development. (Francophone West Africa is composed of Senegal, Mauritania, Guinea, Mali, Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin, Niger, and Burkina-Faso.) The costly investments of limited fiscal resources in these countries' educational systems have resulted in the accumulation of redundant educated labor and incommensurate progress in economic and social development. These failings have been brought on mainly by the value orientation of school curricula that led students to become job seekers rather than enabling them to undertake self-employment or entrepreneurial ventures that would create employment opportunities. Vocational-technical education has been stressed as an alternative that would ensure development by alleviating unemployment, reorienting student attitudes towards rural society, halting urban migration, and transmitting skills and values useful in employment. Vocational technical education is important in socioeconomic growth and development in Francophone West Africa states because development must start at the bottom, that is, in rural areas. Also, vocational-technical education provides those advanced technology skills that cannot be learned through on-the-job training in a developing country. (YLB)

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TRENDS AND ISSUES IN VOCATIONAL TECHNICAL EDUCATION IN FRANCOPHONE WEST AFRICA

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ABSTRACT: On attaining independence, Francophone West Africa countries have been following the assumptions handed down to them that the most effective way of ensuring rapid economic take off and growth was to give high priority to universal formal education. Years later, the costly investments of limited fiscal resources in these countries' educational systems resulted in the accumulation of redundant educated labor and did not make commensurate progress in economic and social development. These failings were brought on by many factors, mainly by the value-orientation of school curricula that led students into becoming job seekers rather than enabling them to undertake self-employment or entrepreneurial ventures by which they could create employment opportunities. The alternative to this situation was a strong commitment to vocational technical education both as a means and goal of development and as an urgent demand of the entry of these countries in the modern technology era. Ironically, due to demographic factors, misguided public policies on education and employment, deficiencies in development objectives, planning and management, West Africa French speaking states' educational systems and economies are still in a sorry state and foreseeable prospects of endogenous development are far ahead.

INTRODUCTION

In many developing countries, and especially in West Africa French speaking states, vocational technical education has begun to be the main trend and issue educational over the last decade. This trend is shown by tremendous increases in: (1) the number and range of vocational technical education programs and institutions; (2) the enrollment of students in such programs; (3) the development of professional training for vocational technical teachers; and (4) the allocation of funds to vocational technical education from both national and international sources.

The rapid growth of vocational technical education over the last decade in Francophone[1] West Africa is a function of three inter-related factors. First, awareness has grown of the many failings of general formal systems of education. These failings include rigidity, elitism, a preoccupation with "bookish" knowledge rather than problem-orientation and functionality and an inability to prepare young people adequately for life and work in rural areas (Kassam and Healy, 1984). Second, there has been a heightened consciousness and, in some cases, strong commitment from educators, planners, and political leaders about the fundamental importance of vocational technical education as both a means and a goal of development. Third, the basic demands of the entry of these countries into the modern technology era have increased the concern with this type of education.

The purpose of the present overview is to provide a rationale of the above trends and issues instrumental to boosting vocational technical education in Francophone West Africa.

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[1] Francophone West Africa is comprised of the following former French colonies: Senegal, Mauritania, Guinea, Mali, Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin, Niger, and Burkina-Faso (Ex-Upper-Volta)

The Failing of General Formal Education

Most third world countries have been led to believe or have wanted to believe that it is the rapid quantitative expansion of general formal education opportunities which holds the basic key to national development. The more education, the more rapid the anticipated development. Francophone West Africa, like other developing countries, has committed itself, therefore, to the goal of universal education in the shortest possible time. After almost two decades of expanding enrollment and hundreds or millions of educational expenditures, economic disparities between rich and poor widen with each passing year. Unemployment and underemployment have reached staggering proportions with the educated increasingly swelling the ranks of those without jobs. It would be naive to place the blame for these problems exclusively on the failures of the general formal education system. But at the same time, one must recognize that many of the early claims made on behalf of formal education have been shown to be greatly exaggerated, and in many instances, simply false (Todoro, 1975).

Concern with vocational technical education in West Africa French speaking states is generated partly by the above mentioned inability of these states to provide adequate education. For a long time, schooling that was sought in these countries, especially in the secondary curricula, was of a traditional academic nature that qualified students for administrative and bureaucratic positions. The reason for this lies first in the traditional value which tended to depreciate manual productive labor or mechanical technical employment; and secondly, in the persistent influence of the colonial educational system which underemphasizes vocational-technical schooling and stresses the general academic curricula as the only way to social advancement.

Besides, a long lived myth was held by the early colonists who thought that since most Africans were dependent on agriculture, the only way in which schooling could make a significant contribution to the national economic development was by imparting an agricultural bias to the curriculum at all levels of the educational system. They were to realize, in the long run, that despite efforts to establish agricultural schools and to devise special agricultural curricula, Francophone West

Africa countries continued to favor academic education along western lines. Public opinion there was that as a means to progress, in a developmental sense, agricultural schools condemn their graduates to inferior status within their own countries. This national belief has shaped a worldview that a national concentration upon agriculture relegates the countries to inferior status within the community of nations (Castle, 1972). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that this type of education has been so unpopular.

Foster (1966) provided the following simple but penetrating explanation of the phenomenon. Throughout the period of colonial rule, agriculture held out for subsistence prospects for school leavers whereas the primary function of general formal education was to provide the more able African youngsters with entry into the European-dominated economic system. Within the exchange economy, however, there was relatively greater demand for clerical and commercial skills than for technical skills. In view of the slow rate of enlarging exchange economy, the financial reward and employment opportunities for technical trained individuals, whether in farming or manufacturing, were never commensurate with those in the clerical fields. Thus, the graduates of formal academic schools were always at an advantage compared to graduates of vocational technical oriented institutions. In these circumstances, pressure for general academic type education was nothing else than the familiar mechanism of supply and demand in the labor market, hence reverting to the private demand for education. Parents and students, far from being irrational about general education, correctly appraised the actual job opportunities that were available. In short, as Foster put it, "Given the occupational structure, an academic education was pre-eminently a vocational education allowing entry to the most prestigious and highly paid occupation." (p. 23) This resulted in a push and rush for general formal education right after the Independence Year in 1960.

The formal academic education expanded so greatly in Francophone West Africa that schooling absorbed the largest proportion of government's revenue; and, as it expanded it increasingly transmitted values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge inconsistent with indigenous socio-economic realities. Despite huge investments in education, the objectives of

formal education were not met. The system produces high expectations and aspirations that many people cannot achieve. The school system, for example, carries the message that all children, as long as they study hard and succeed in their examinations, have a chance of getting highly paid jobs that will enable them to have the material comforts they desire. As happens most of the time, after the students have obtained their academic qualifications, they cannot find suitable employment. In addition, because of the emphasis in the curriculum on academic subjects and intellectual effort, as opposed to practical subjects and physical effort, schools also carry the hidden message that physical work is not important despite the fact that the vast majority of those who pass through school will have to earn their living through physical work (Omo-Fadaka, 1982).

All in all, the rapid expansion of general formal education systems brought about several problems such as: irregular school attendance; high drop out (wastage) and failure (stagnation) rates; widespread relapse into illiteracy; severe imbalances in the progress of universalization with rural areas lagging far behind urban areas; lower rate of school attendance and completion by girls; poorly trained and poorly paid teachers; badly constructed and badly equipped schools; and widespread unemployment among even certified school leavers and college or university graduates (Zachariah, 1985).

In the 1970's, social dysfunctioning of formal education school systems, expressed through this failure to provide quality and efficiency education and the deep dissatisfaction fostered among students, parents, teachers, educators, and political leaders was instrumental to the origin and development of educational reforms in many West Africa French speaking countries. By and large, these reforms of educational systems aimed at correcting abuses, enhancing efficiency, improving effectiveness, changing the policy process, accommodating a variety of new groups, or reformulating goals (Merrit and Coombs, 1977). Among other things, these reforms stressed such new areas as vocational technical education. As an alternative to the failings of general formal education, this type of education is believed to ensure development in the sense that it alleviates unemployment, re-orients student attitudes towards rural society, halts urban migration and

transmits skills and values useful in employment (Lisslis and Hogan, 1983).

Vocational Technical Education as a Means and Goal of Development

There is an evident inter-relationship of vocational technical education and socioeconomic growth and development. The technology explosion affects individuals, institutions, and government organizations by changing what they do, how they do it, and how they relate to one another. Hence, advances in technology not only mean new machines, systems, and procedures, but also indicate needed changes in skills, training, working conditions, and academic and professional requirements for employment (Miller, 1984). Yet, economic growth and development for the sake of growth came under severe criticism over the last decade. In many Francophone West Africa states, growth was taking place only in urbanized sectors of the society, and there was little or no spread of the benefits of such growth to other sectors.

Economic development has typically meant an emphasis on the urban industrial sector, and a concomittant neglect of the rural agricultural sector. Even in rare circumstances where early attempts were made to increase agricultural productivity, rural education failed to receive high priority (Castle, 1972). It is now false, as Myers (1969) has stated, that in order to maximize human resource development nationally with limited financial resources, developing countries have to concentrate their investments in the advanced urban regions where the immediate return is greatest. There has been rapid awareness that economic and social development in the rural areas of Francophone West Africa, where most of the poverty is concentrated, can be fruitful only on the basis of a bottom-to-top development that takes into account indigenous social and cultural realities. Since between 80 and 90 percent of the population of these countries live and work in the rural areas and villages, and are subsistance farmers, the base of development should be rural, not urban. (Omo-Fadaka, 1982).

In this policy framework of development, education has an important role. In addition to shaping national identity and attitudes for social modernization, above all, education has to provide the more complex skills required for the management of the industrial economy, and for the development and diffusion of production related technology.

Furthermore, Francophone West Africa's developing countries, as latecomers to industrialization, need to develop the capacity to acquire the increasingly complex scientific and technical knowledge required for the operating and improving modern forms of production which are to be adopted from the industrially advanced countries. In view of this heightened consciousness, a disproportionate amount of the countries' resources are channeled into the rapid expansion of vocational technical education systems, secondary and post secondary, particularly the scientific vocational and technological fields (Irrizary, 1980). The highest priority is given to the training of low and intermediate level technicians, tradesmen, craftsmen, and agricultural workers. They are considered the strategic human resources which, together with the modern industries, constitute the base of economic growth and development, and the center from which modernization would diffuse to all other sectors of the economy and the society in general.

Attempts are being made to establish and expand vocational technical systems parallel to the traditional academic education as an alternative strategy for upgrading the working population. To do so entails the re-orientation of curricula to provide greater emphasis on agricultural, technical, and vocational subjects to sensitize students to the problems of work and development. Besides, vocational technical education helps the most vulnerable groups that are: (1) those who have fled from school with no qualifications and who are rapidly becoming marginalized because the unskilled jobs that awaited them in the past have disappeared; and (2) girls who need to be given the will to seek access to non-traditional directions through technical studies and the self-assurance to assume new roles because technology is eliminating the traditional feminine occupations.

Finally, general formal education fits well within social conditions whereby only a limited number receive it so that they have an assured place in the dominant social and politic elite groups. Also essential is a level of economic development such that there is no significant demand for technically skilled people. Such education becomes dysfunctional with the beginning and progress of development because: (1) it does not supply skilled manpower for the economic roles essential for vocational technical development; (2) it puts out into the occupational

market a supply of manpower with expectations that their investment in schooling will be rewarded in terms of income and status, but for whose skills there is no demand, and who, consequently, become an unemployable burden rather than asset to development. The result is an imbalance or a disequilibrium between the skills and motivations produced, and the assumed occupational needs of Francophone West Africa's developing societies.

In order to restore the equilibrium between the demand for and the supply of educated manpower for development purposes, West Africa French speaking states have wanted, over the last decade, the contents of education to be primarily vocational and technical, meaning the inculcation of specific technical skills, knowledge, and role-specific productive orientations and motivations (Aran and Als, 1972). Adequate skillful human resources training and supply were indeed major requirements for these countries to access modern technology.

Vocational Technical Education as a Demand of the Modern Technology Era

In industrial societies, the influence of the economy upon the educational system is exceptionally strong. As a result, education imparts to the future working population the type of skills and knowledge that the economy requires. In developing countries, an advanced technology can no longer depend upon traditional on the job training. Newer and more complex skills require not only a literate work force, but in a higher echelon, formal training in science, industry, technology, and agriculture. At the same time, the expansion in trade and commerce gives rise to a need for commercial skills at the practical and the more theoretical level. As a result, skills at all levels are increasingly acquired within formal or informal vocational technical institutions.

The most crucial problems facing societies undergoing modernization are the preparation of manpower to master constantly advancing techno-economic development and promote integration of the lower classes. Educational systems, expected to meet the needs of adaptation and integration, are often challenged by a situation in which the successful performance of one may reduce the effectiveness or the other. For example, vocational technical education usually absorbs a high proportion

of the under-resourced population while at the same time it is expected to prepare sophisticated technical manpower in agriculture, industry and business (Harbison and Myers, 1964). In the past decade, Francophone West Africa has continuously established as an adaptive response new educational systems and training to meet vocational technical needs that were being neglected through international or subregional higher education programs and institutions. At the same time, technical colleges, or schools, and colleges of higher technology have all made attempts to establish educational institutions that conform with national or local needs as an integrative response to an extent that existing institutions failed to do.

Specific international higher education institutions located in each of the Francophone West Africa countries carry out the sophisticated manpower training. These institutions receive funds from national and/or international sources; they enroll international students from the Francophone West Africa sub region; and they are often located in state capitals. The Ecole Polytechnique de Thies (EPT), created in 1975, receives financial assistance from the Canadian government. The Senegalese Polytechnic School of Thies offers graduate courses in civil and mechanical engineering. Intermediate level technicians in electronics, mechanics, computer science, and management are trained at the Ecole Nationale Superieure et Universitaire de Technologie (ENSUT). The National Higher School of Technology is part of the University of Dakar the same as the Ecole des Bibliothecaires, Archivistes et Documentalistes (EBAD), the Ecole Nationale des Assistants et Educateurs Specialises (ENAES) and the Ecole Superieure de Secretariat (ESS). All these schools offer a two-year degree program to librarians, archivists and documentalists, social workers, people involved in special education, and secretaries. Next to the University of Dakar is the Ecole Internationale de Sante et de Medecine Veterinaire (EISMV) which provides training for veterinarians.

The contribution of the Republic of Mali to sub regional technical human resources development is manifested through the following two institutions: The Ecole Nationale des Ingenieurs (ENI) and the Ecole Centrale Pour L'Industrie, Ie Commerce et les Carrieres Administratives (ECICA). Both schools are located at Bamako and offer graduate courses

in engineering, soil science, manufacturing, management, business, and public administration.

The Centre Regional de Formation Pour L'Entretien des Engins Routiers (CERFER) at Lome (Togo) provides continuing professional training in auto mechanics, machinery science, and mechanical engineering to public works mechanics involved in road maintenance.

The biggest investment in vocational technical education in Francophone West Africa is that of the Ivory Coast which runs four international vocational technical higher education institutions: The Ecole Superieure de Navigation (ESN) or Merchant Marine Academy; the Ecole Superieure des P.T.T. (ESPTT) for telephone and telegraph engineers. The Institut National Superieur de L'Enseignement Technique (INSET); and the Institut Pedagogique National de L'Enseignement Technique (IPNET) train or retrain graduate students and professionals in technical skills such as: secretarial, accounting, business, electronics, computer science, engineering, construction, industrial design, and home economics.

To promote the integration and occupational preparation for traditional students, each Francophone West Africa country has established minor vocational technical schools and colleges. These institutions include: craftsmen schools, technical high schools, institutes of agriculture and farming, higher institutes of technology and industrial mechanics, normal schools, centers for continuing professional training; and schools of medicine, agriculture, public administration and allied health. All in all, the trend of modern vocational technical education in Francophone West Africa, although laudable, still must rise to the acute problem of unemployment and underemployment.

Conclusion

The role of both general formal education and vocational technical education as well is to provide adaptive and integrative responses to a society's needs. By the time general education was seen as having failed to do so, sharp criticism was directed to the school as being the major obstacle to economic and social development to the point that some educators (Freire, 1970, Reimer, 1971, Illich, 1971) advocated its abolition. Ironically, vocational technical education, given its

inadequacy, was thought of as a fallacy (Foster, 1965). However, instead of asking how practical as opposed to theoretical education should be or whether or not an education should be useful, any rationale on the trends and issues in vocational technical education in Francophone West Africa should not simply assume that increased inputs into education automatically generate development. It should rather indicate what are the comparative advantages and limitations of various types of educational programs in the schools and outside them in economic growth.

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